

Alpha

The Priority & Practice of Evangelism

Canadian Church Leader
Perspectives in 2021

Jesus' last command was to make disciples of all nations...

For many, this is the mission of the Church, and yet, 65% of church leaders in Canada say their congregation/parish hasn't prioritized evangelization over the last several years.

Change is all around us but often the biggest changes take place beneath the surface in our attitudes and perceptions. Experiences—like a global pandemic—or changes in our understanding of equality shape the way we make sense of the world around us.

As Christians, our understanding of and approach to evangelism in Canada have shifted and evolved as Canadian culture, perceptions, and society have changed over time. And now those changes are beginning to come to the surface.



We asked church leaders from across Canada to share their thoughts on evangelism with us.

The **aim** of this survey was to explore the attitudes, behaviours, and experiences surrounding evangelization from the perspective of Canadian church leaders, across theological traditions and Canadian regions.

Reimagining Evangelism in Canada

24% of Canadians claim to have no religion and that number is on the rise. At the same time, the number of people who identify as Christians is on the decline. We know that many congregations are struggling to survive and that initial projections related to the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that these trends are set to continue, if not accelerate, in the foreseeable future.

Our hope for this research is to better understand the current cultural moment for the Church in Canada and to serve the Church by identifying barriers to evangelization so that together, we can begin to reimagine evangelism and continue to make Jesus' last command our first priority. Through both proclamation and demonstration there is opportunity in our nation to love and serve our neighbour, and our hope is that this research provides helpful insights as we move into this next season.

Throughout this report we will use evangelism and evangelization interchangeably recognizing that different denominations and faith traditions use these two different terms.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

Matthew 5:14

A Word from Alpha Canada

My life is built around the belief that inspiring and equipping every believer through the local church to share the gospel is of paramount importance to discipleship, and to giving others the opportunity to encounter Jesus for the first time.

That's why at Alpha, we are committed to serving the Church in in Canada so that they might share Jesus in every community from coast to coast. To understand the challenges the Church faces to evangelize we, along with our partners at the Flourishing Congregations Institute, recognized the need for Canadian research on evangelism to inform a uniquely Canadian response.

The best people we could turn to for insights on evangelism in the cultural context we live in are the amazing church leaders who serve the Church in Canada faithfully day in and day out. By reflecting back to the Church the understanding of her own leaders around evangelism, we believe we can begin to reimagine evangelism in Canada. Our hope is to come alongside the Church in Canada and provide the tools and resources she needs to equip the body of Christ—to serve and grow together as well as to help friends, family and neighbours encounter Jesus.



Faithfully yours,
Shaila Visser
National Director, Alpha Canada

A Word from Flourishing Congregations Institute

Data can be a powerful tool; it can “say” many things. As a sociologist of religion who cares deeply about the local church in Canada, I am committed to gathering and sharing data in accessible ways that would help local Canadian congregations. Toward this end, my research and writing has spanned topics from millennials to religious nones to congregations. Part of my task entails helping to convince church leaders that data matters. Above all, data helps us to compare what we think is true about human attitudes and behaviours with how people actually think or behave in the world. The gap between what is and what we think ought to be can have significant implications for how individuals and churches act.

I suspect that this report on evangelism in Canada will alert you to some surprising findings alongside some less shocking observations. But data do not speak for themselves; they need to be interpreted. This is where sociology can be particularly useful, to help us make sense of the role that one's social environment plays in shaping people's approach, in this

case, to evangelism. A group's theology, social narratives, habits, values, and practices all factor into how important or unimportant evangelism is or is not for the individual, congregation, or denomination.

My hope and prayer is that the data to follow give you a clearer sense of what is, invite you to imagine what could be, and then inspire you to take the bold steps to lessen the gap between the “is” and “ought.” On behalf of our team at the Flourishing Congregations Institute at Ambrose University, it was a pleasure to provide leadership to this national study on evangelism in Canada, in partnership with Alpha Canada.



Dr. Joel Thiessen
Professor of Sociology and
Director of the Flourishing
Congregations Institute,
Ambrose University

Key Findings

1. Attitudes toward evangelism differ between senior pastors/priests and other church leaders.

- 46-48% of church leaders who work with children and youth say that it is wrong to share one's faith with someone in the hopes that they will one day identify as Christian.
- Senior pastors are more likely to agree that evangelization is personally important to their ministry (over 70%) vs those in other church leadership roles (around 50% or fewer, depending on role).
- Senior leaders are more likely to practice evangelistic behaviours than youth pastors.

2. The most encouraged and practiced method of evangelization today is showing vs telling.

- 45% of churches reportedly encourage "Showing one's faith through their actions."
- 58% of church leaders report frequently "Showing one's faith through their actions."

3. The majority of Churches are not prioritizing or equipping for evangelism.

- 65% of church leaders say that evangelism has not been a priority in their church in the last several years.
- 55% of Canadian congregations do not equip for evangelism.

4. Only half of church leaders connect evangelization with discipleship and prayer.

- 55% of church leaders agree that prayer is central to evangelism.
- 48% of church leaders agree that evangelism is central to discipleship.

5. We think we're doing better at evangelism than we are.

- Best researcher estimates suggest that only 10-15% of people in churches are new to faith, however, 42% of church leaders believe that anywhere between 16-50%+ of their members have come to faith for the very first time through their ministry.

6. The global pandemic prompted innovation and increased prioritization.

- 52% of church leaders report having adapted/innovated how they approach evangelization during the pandemic.
- 41% of church leaders said COVID-19 increased the prioritization of evangelism.

7. Pastors are leading by example and personally benefiting from evangelism.

- 83% are currently engaged in one-on-one relationships for purposes that include evangelism.
- 60-70% of church leaders say that they engage in evangelistic activities on a weekly basis.
- 61% agree that evangelization positively impacts their personal spiritual growth.

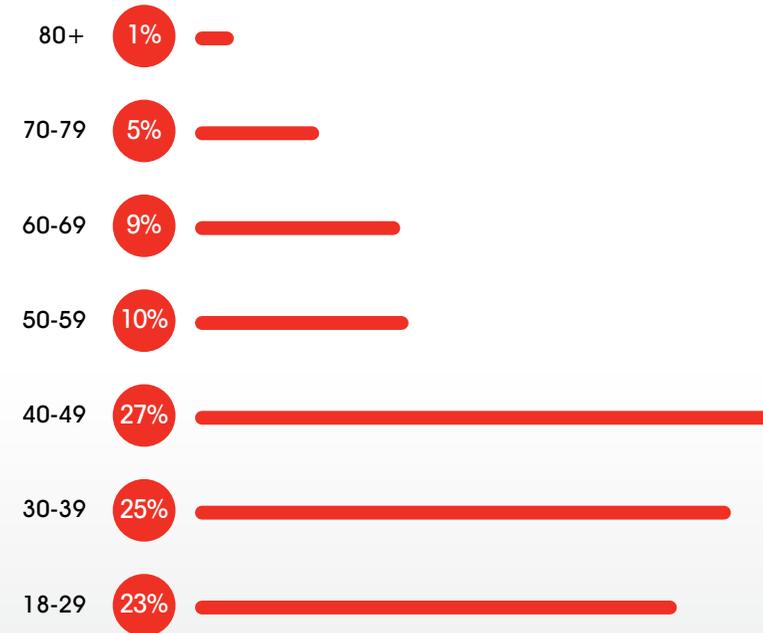
About the survey

Drawing on partner organization networks, survey invitations were circulated via email and various social media outlets to thousands of church leaders across Canada, who were then encouraged to share this survey with those in their network. Anyone involved in paid or voluntary congregational/parish leadership in Canada was invited to complete the survey.

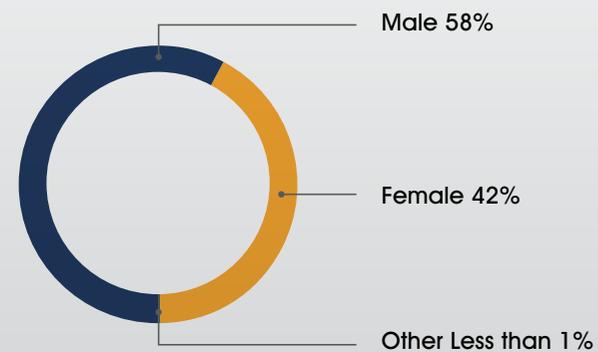
Between May and July 2021, 2,700 surveys were completed. We sought a diverse sample of leaders based on gender, age, province/territory, city/town size, theological tradition, leadership role in one's congregation/parish, length of time that a congregation/parish has existed, and congregation/parish size. While the demographic statistics reveal a strong cross-section of groups involved in this survey, we realize that some groups may be underrepresented.

Our data analysis explored variations across the different demographic areas. For instance, did those from a certain age group, province, or church size respond to survey questions differently? If/where notable differences arose, they have been noted. Overall, there are far more similarities than dissimilarities across different groupings.

Age



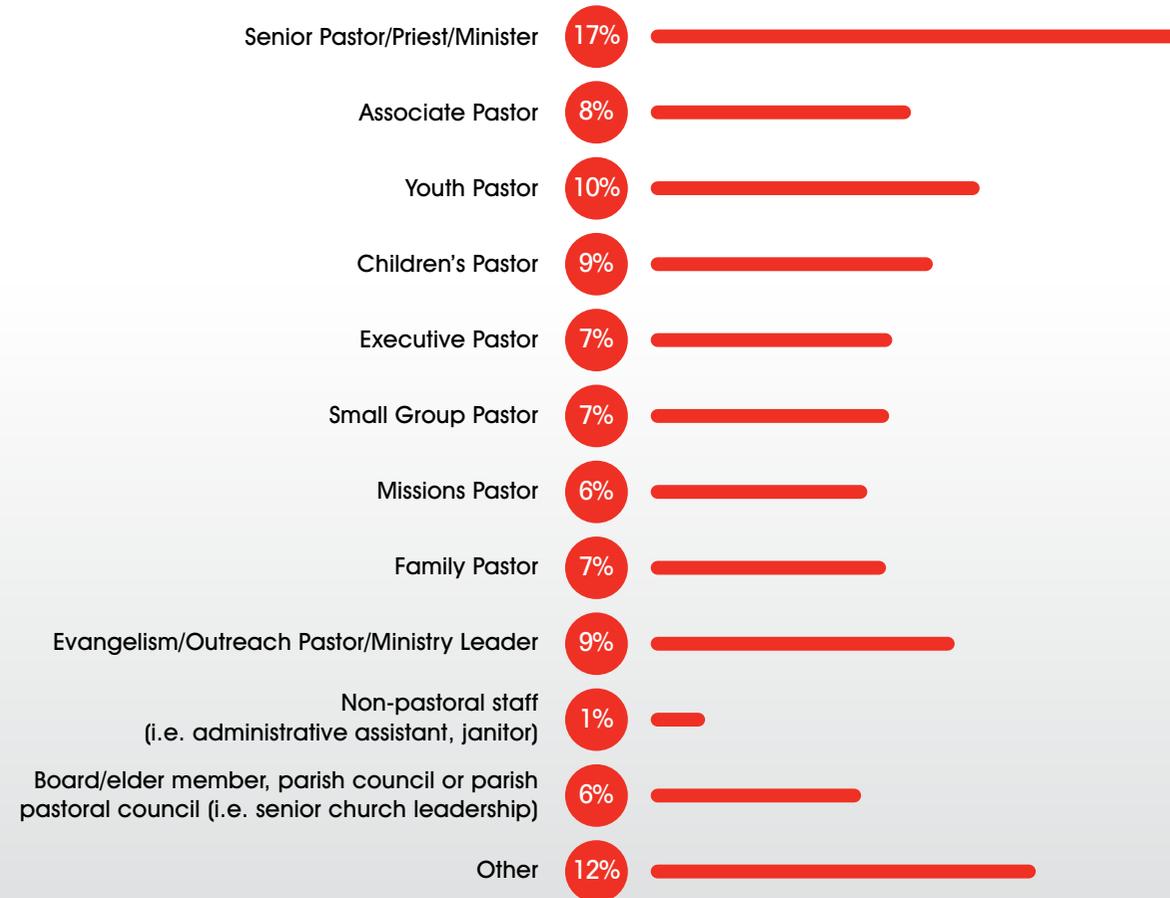
Gender



What denomination/tradition does your congregation/parish identify with?



Which of the following best describes your role in your congregation/parish, whether in a paid or voluntary capacity?



In what province/territory is your congregation/parish located?

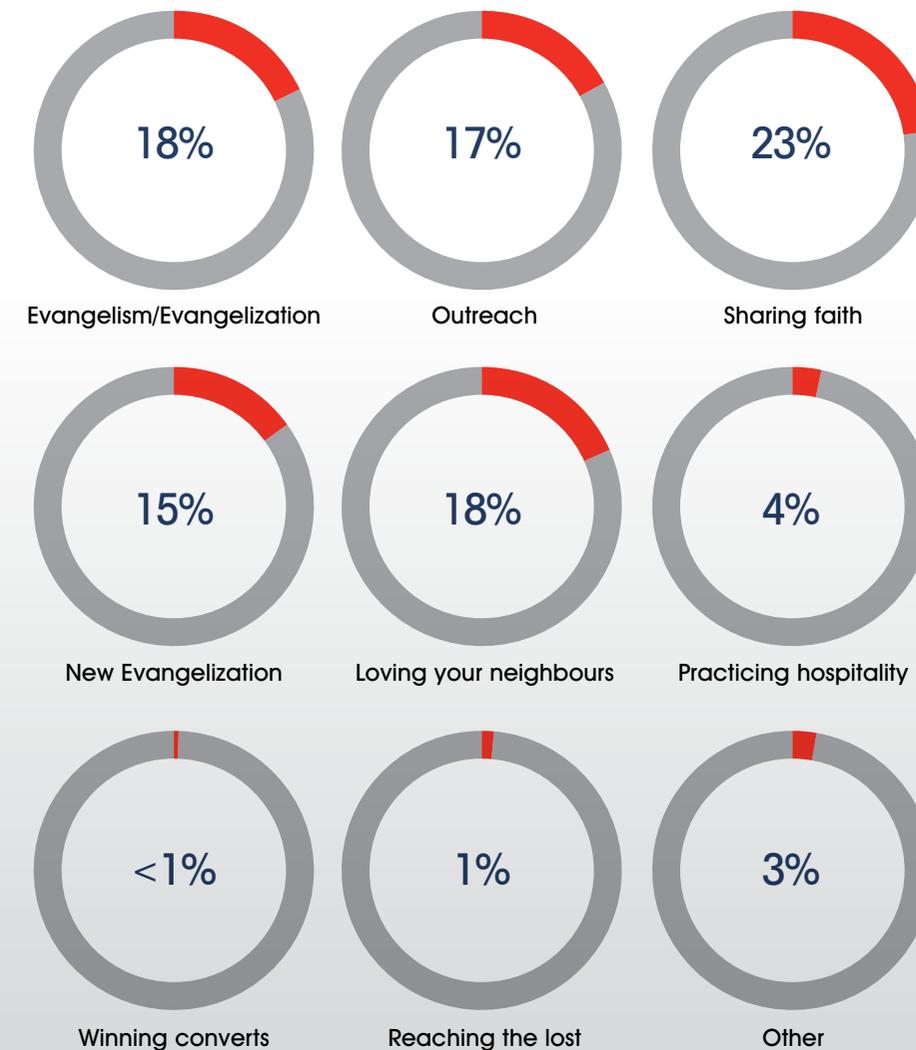


How do we define evangelism?

At the outset of the survey, we defined evangelism as “sharing the good news of Jesus with lapsed/non-Christians in such a way that people want to know and follow Him as Saviour and Lord.”

The research, however, showed that we don't actually all agree on the definition of evangelism. But rather, definitions and aims surrounding evangelism are complex and diverse. This is evidenced by the varied language and terms used by both paid and voluntary church leaders when speaking about evangelism as well as the often conflicting views on the central goals and aims of evangelization.

When teaching/preaching on evangelization in your church, what is the most common language that you use?



There is no common language when it comes to evangelism.

These statistics are a good reminder that people use different language to speak about a topic that, on the surface, might seem fairly straightforward and “common” to many within church settings but clearly this subject is thought about in distinct ways. Church leaders and their congregants might benefit from clear, transparent, and theologically grounded discussions of what they do and do not mean regarding evangelism.



As a church leader, how does your theology inform what you believe evangelism is and the subsequent aims of evangelization?

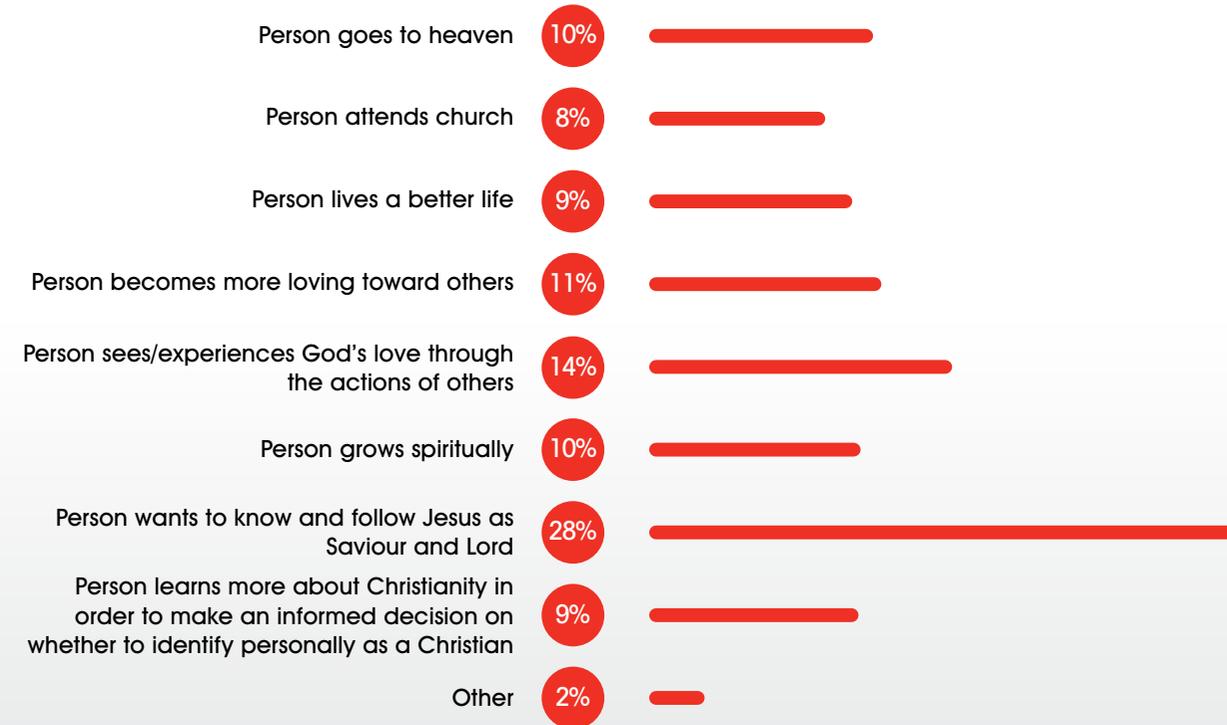
How do you communicate those definitions and aims alongside evangelistic methods to those in your parish?

There is no unified aim or goal of evangelism

How people define the aims of evangelism will directly reflect and impact their theology and method of evangelization. The following data reveals a range of goals associated with evangelism.

Senior pastors (39%), evangelism pastors (27%), and associate pastors (22%) were the most likely to clearly signal: “person wants to know and follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord” but no clear winner emerged among remaining responses for those in other church leadership roles. In addition, those who say their churches give priority to evangelism seem to be clearer on their conception of the central aim of evangelism (“person wants to know and follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord”), showing less variation across the options.

What would you say is the central goal/aim of evangelization?

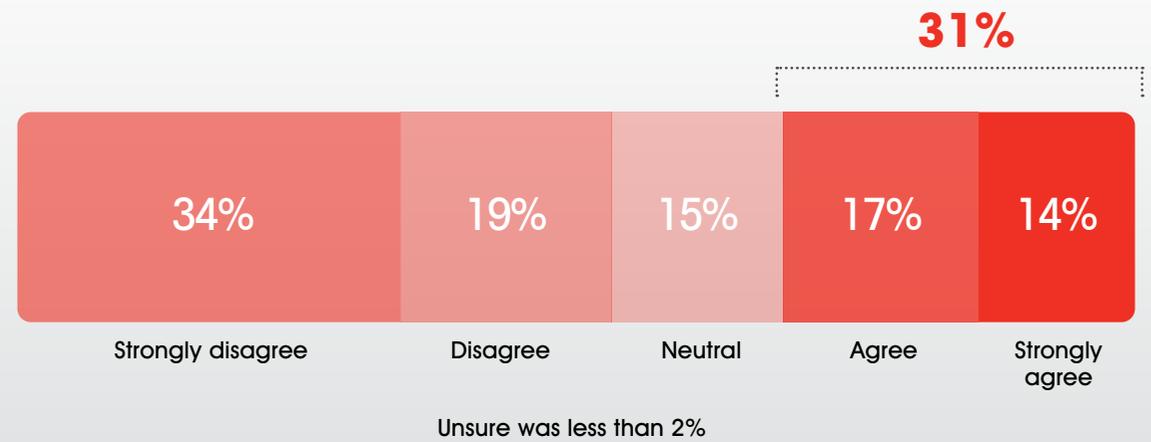


31% of church leaders say it is wrong to share their Christian beliefs with someone of a different religion or no religion with the hopes that they will one day identify as Christian.



How do we have a unified approach to evangelism taking into consideration different generational approaches?

It is wrong to share my Christian beliefs with someone of a different religion or no religion at all, in hopes that they will one day identify as Christian



Those working with children, youth, or families are most likely to “strongly agree” or “agree” (46-48%) that it is wrong to share one’s faith with the hopes of conversion. Senior pastors are the most likely to “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (65%).

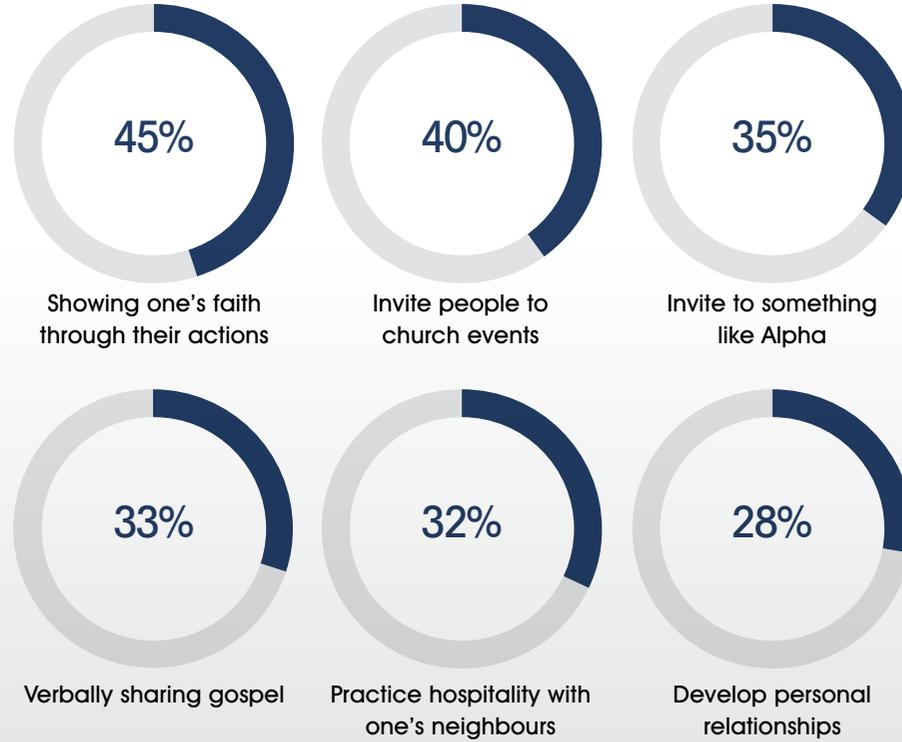
A recent Barna study also found that 44% of Gen Z Christians feel “it’s wrong to share one’s personal belief with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith” (Gen Z = 24 years old or younger).

These are challenging statistics as research across religious groups consistently reveals that most who join a religious group do so during their childhood, teenage, or young adult years. This could reflect a growing tentativeness among Gen Z and their leaders to push one’s religious beliefs on another, especially if such beliefs are perceived as exclusive, narrow, or intolerant.

The primary method of evangelism being encouraged in Canadian churches is to show one's faith through actions over verbally sharing the gospel or developing personal relationships.

Even though "develop personal relationships" is sixth on the list, it goes without saying that relationships create opportunities for sharing our faith through actions, inviting a person to church, showing hospitality, and talking about faith. Studies also show that the number one reason a person joins a faith group is because a trusted friend or family member has extended an invitation to them.

What are the three most common methods of evangelism encouraged among those in your congregation/parish?

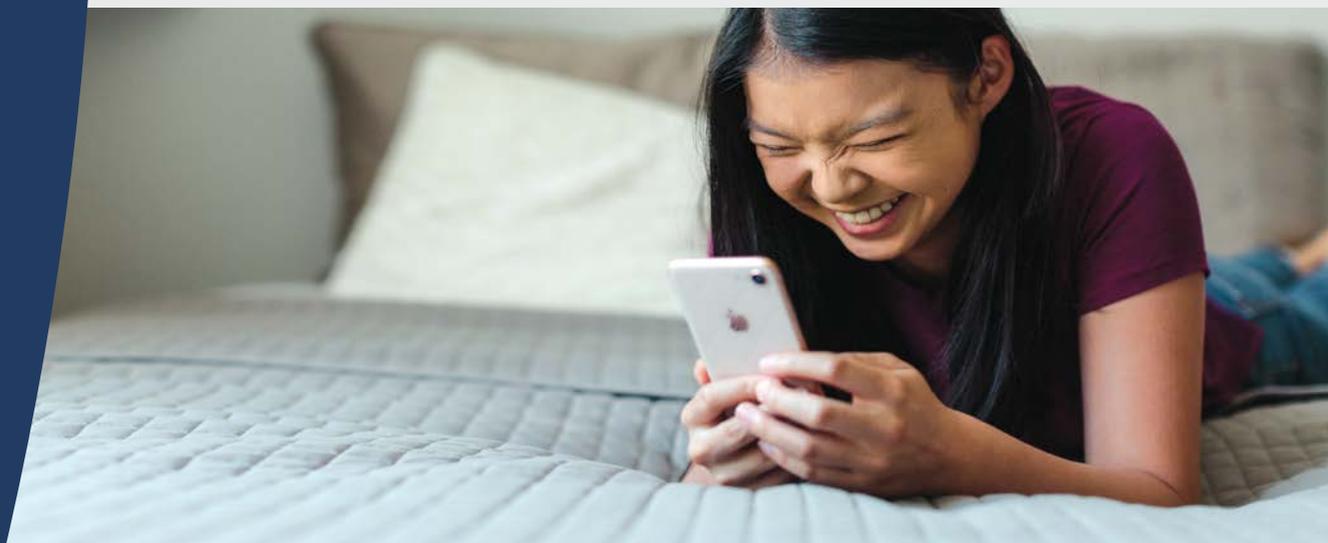
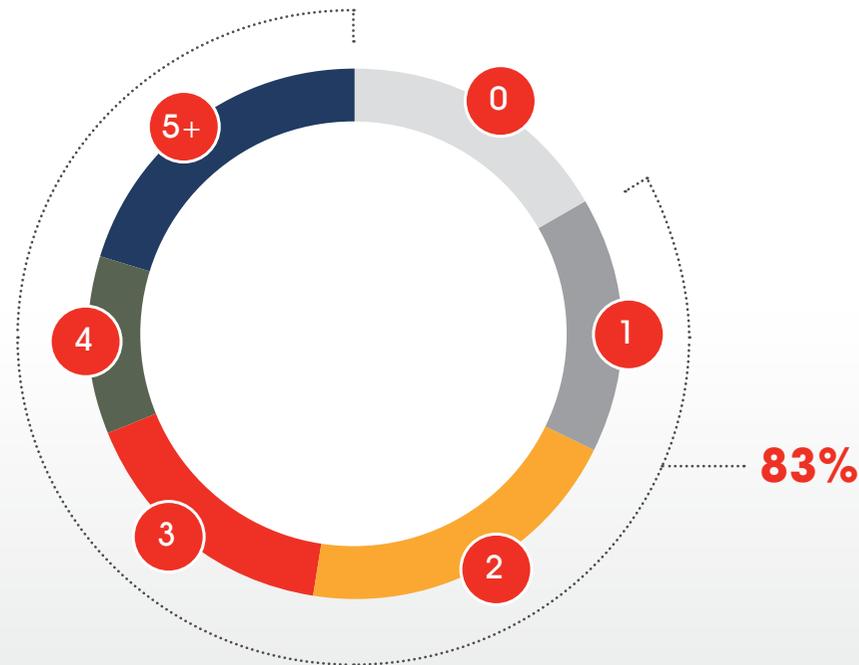


83% of church leaders engage in one-on-one relationships for reasons that include evangelism.

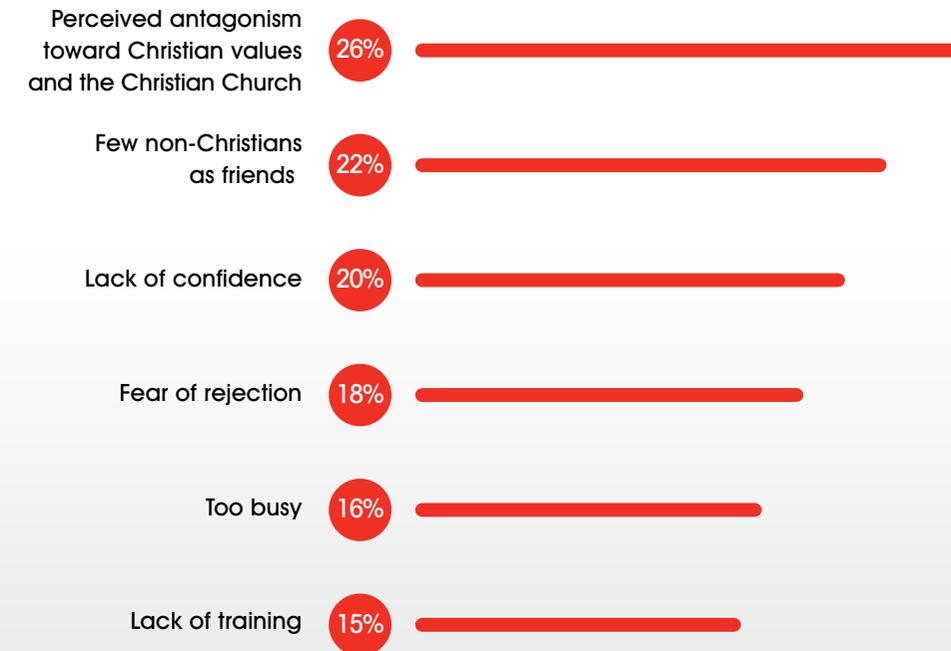
The more of a priority a congregation reportedly gives to evangelism, the less likely surveyed church leaders are to say they have zero one-on-one relationships with an evangelistic purpose in mind.

Leaders can play an important role in modelling to their congregation that personal relationships are central to evangelism. Church leaders, by being intentional about this practice and sharing stories out of their own experiences, can play a part in helping to nurture a congregation toward a stronger evangelistic subculture.

At present, what number of one-on-one relationships are you engaged in for purposes that include evangelization?



What are the three biggest challenges in evangelism for you personally, if any?



The number one challenge in evangelism is perceived antagonism toward Christian faith.

Some challenges overlap with earlier observations that some Christians perceive themselves to be outsiders from those in Canadian society. This social shift is magnified in a Canadian environment that is less Christian today than in generations before. Furthermore, having few non-Christian friends is one sign of people retreating and gravitating toward others of similar beliefs.

Lack of confidence could be the result of a lack of training and equipping congregations around evangelization. This study deals with challenges experienced by church leaders but these findings also parallel similar findings among congregants in another Canadian study summarized in the book, *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada*. In order for churches to strengthen their capacity for evangelism, they will need to tackle these challenges head on.

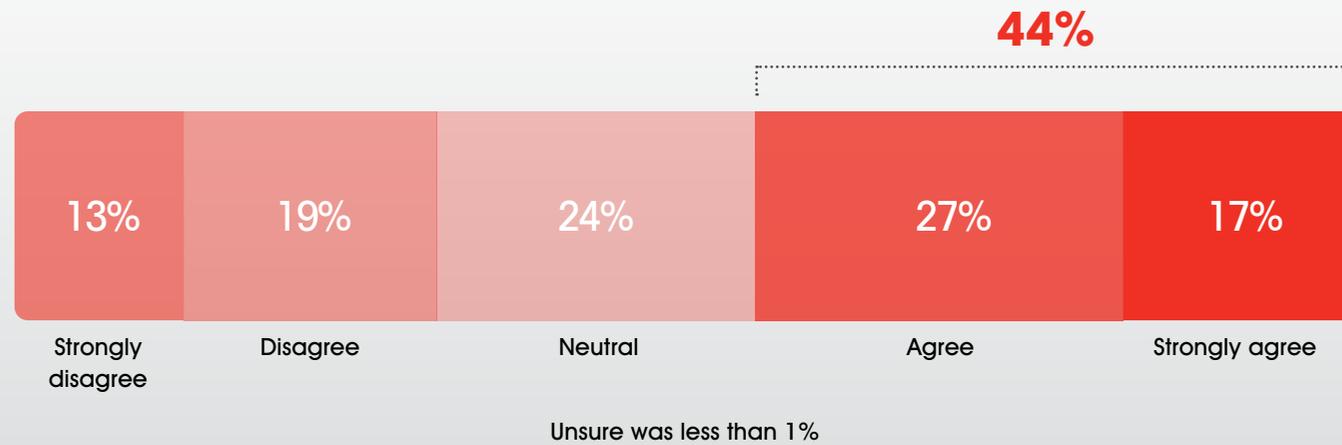
Only 44% of church leaders say that their church equips its members to evangelize.

Few believe that they possess a natural desire or ability to share their Christian faith with others. Different research studies across Canada, the United States, and Australia suggest that some are uncomfortable sharing their faith with others because they are not confident that they know how to. Part of this reservation is related to individuals not being clear or confident in the basics of their own Christian beliefs and commitments. This is where churches can play an important role to help its members.

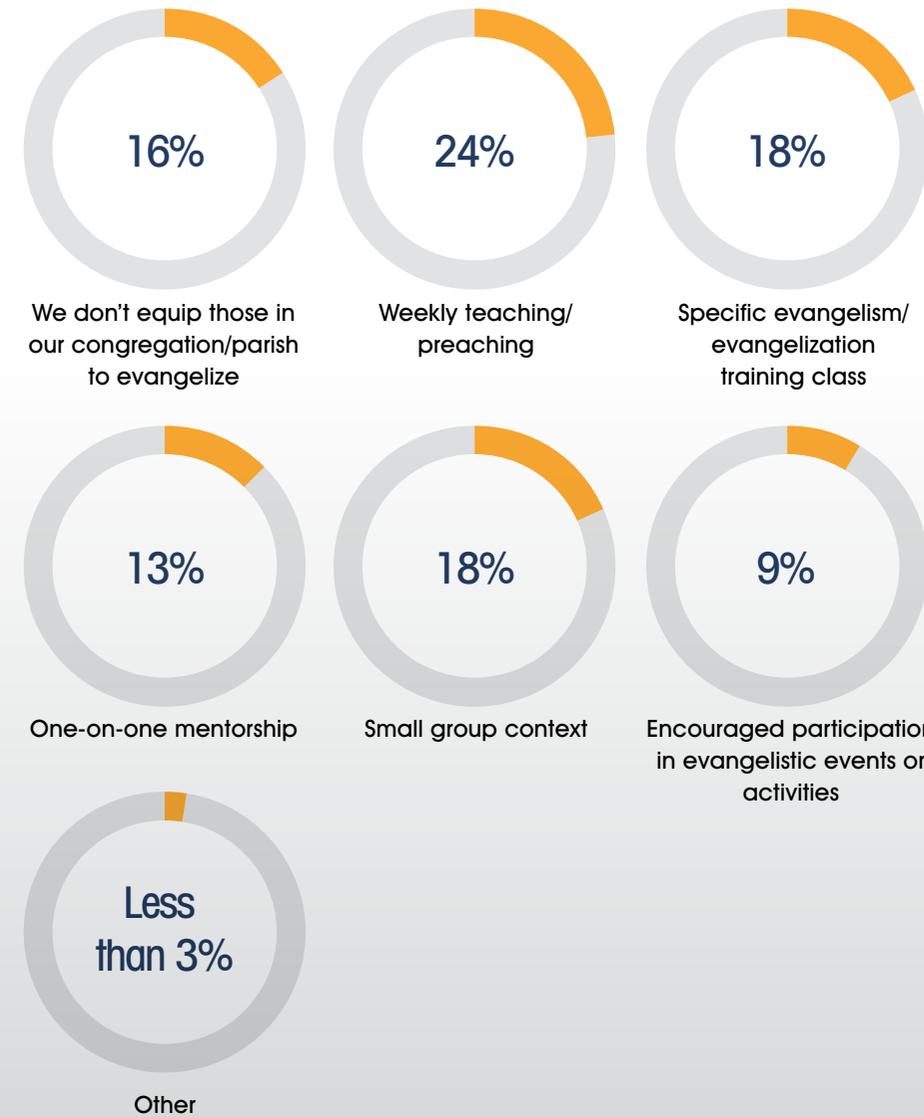


How do leaders help members to clearly understand the essentials of their Christian faith? How do churches equip members to share their faith with others?

My church equips its members to evangelize.



What is the most common way that those in your congregation/parish are equipped to evangelize?



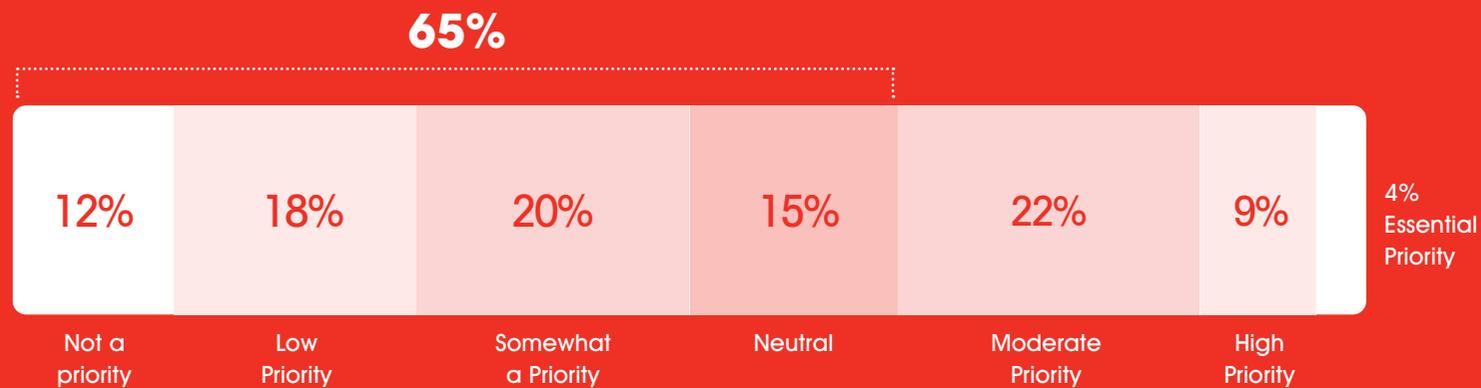
There are many ways to equip a congregation to evangelize.

Equipping occurs in several venues and often times in multiple contexts within the same congregation. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The lack of equipping, however, might be reflective of the low priority that church leaders give to evangelization.

Giving priority to evangelism...

65% of paid or voluntary church leaders say their congregations or parishes have not prioritized evangelism over the last several years.

As you think about your local congregation/parish over the last several years, to what extent would you say your congregation/parish has given priority (or not) to evangelism?



Unless congregations prioritize evangelism, it is unlikely for most in a church community to take evangelism seriously in their own activities. Evangelization needs to be talked about, taught, and modelled in the larger community of faith; people need training and opportunities for evangelism to occur. From these figures, an opening exists for congregations to reconsider the level of priority that they give to evangelism.

Interestingly, those leading in congregations with fewer than 100 weekly attenders attach a higher priority to evangelism. This could be due to smaller congregations sensing a greater urgency for more members to ensure their congregation's ability to survive or thrive, whereas larger congregations are less dependent on new members to sustain the organization.

61% of church leaders reported that evangelization positively impacts their own personal spiritual growth.

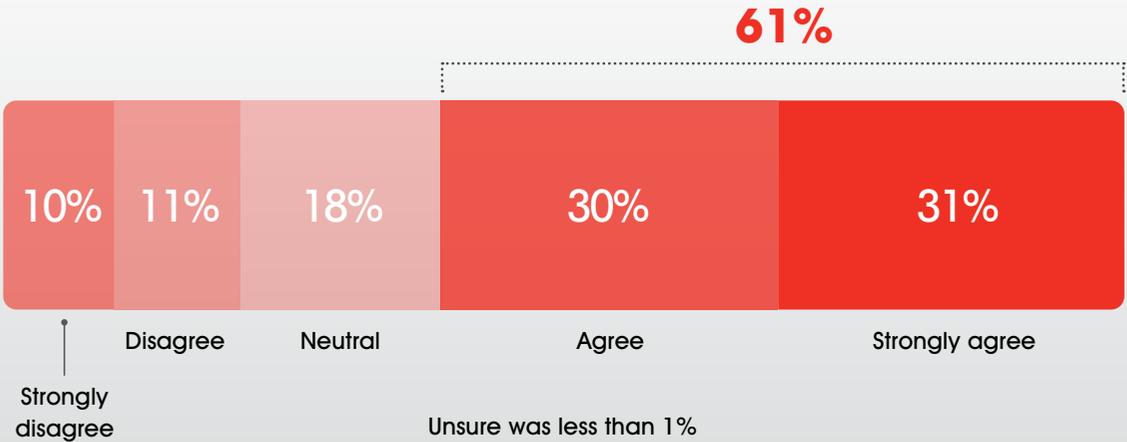
Another Barna study showed that similarly, Christian teens (73%) report that they feel more confident in their faith after having a spiritual conversation with a non-Christian and they are eager to share their faith again.

Reviving Evangelism in the Next Generation (Barna, 2021)

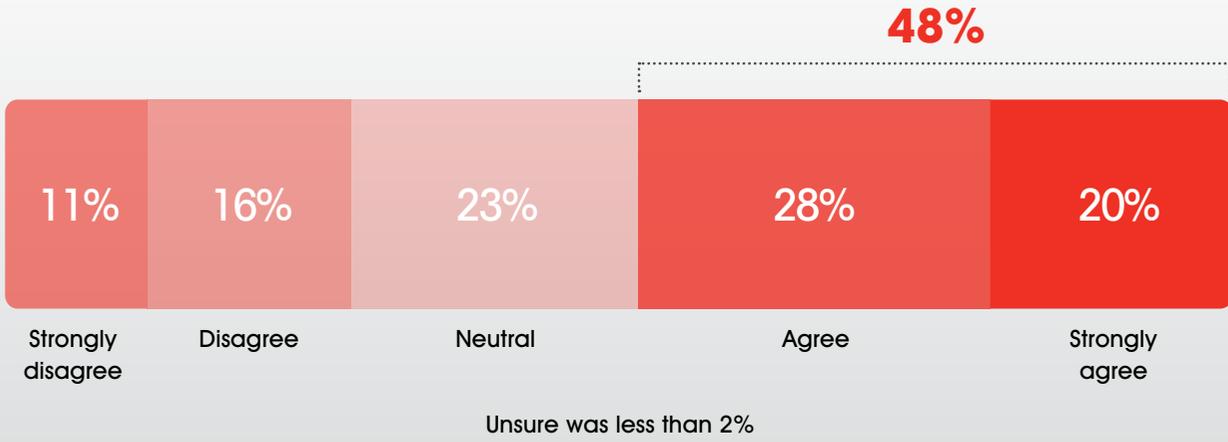
48% of church leaders surveyed say that evangelism is central to their church's approach to discipleship.

One potential reason congregations give a low priority to evangelism is that they fail to see that evangelism and discipleship go hand in hand. Evangelism is connected to a person's faith formation as they learn more about their own faith, pray, grow in their capacity to become more like Christ, give and receive hospitality, extend grace, and participate in God's kingdom activity in relationship with others. The opportunity is there for church leaders to help foster a holistic approach to life in Christ and to explicitly link evangelism with discipleship.

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement? "Evangelism positively impacts my personal spiritual growth."



To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement? "Evangelism is central to my church's approach to discipleship."



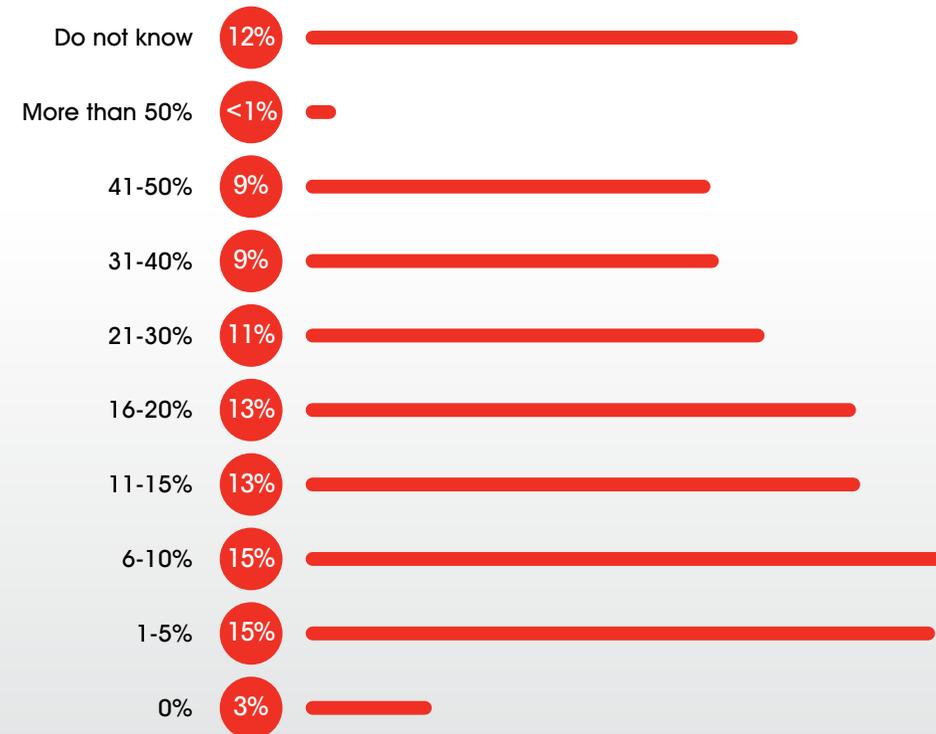
When it comes to the effectiveness of our evangelistic efforts, we think we are doing better than we actually are.

Another potential reason congregations are giving evangelism a lower priority might be that churches are overestimating how effective their current evangelistic efforts are.

Canadian research suggests that only 10-15% of people in pews are new to faith in the last five years. In contrast, 42% of church leaders believe that somewhere between 16-50+% of their members have come to faith for the very first time through their ministry.

One comparison to stand out in our analysis is that congregations that have existed for 30+ years, as well as smaller churches, are less likely to track those who are new or have returned to the Christian faith—roughly 50% versus 70-80% of younger or larger parishes. This could be due to fewer resources in these settings versus larger or presumably younger demographic parishes. On its own, tracking does not reveal how important or unimportant evangelism is to a church. Still, most organizations tend to monitor those areas that are deemed more of a priority to them.

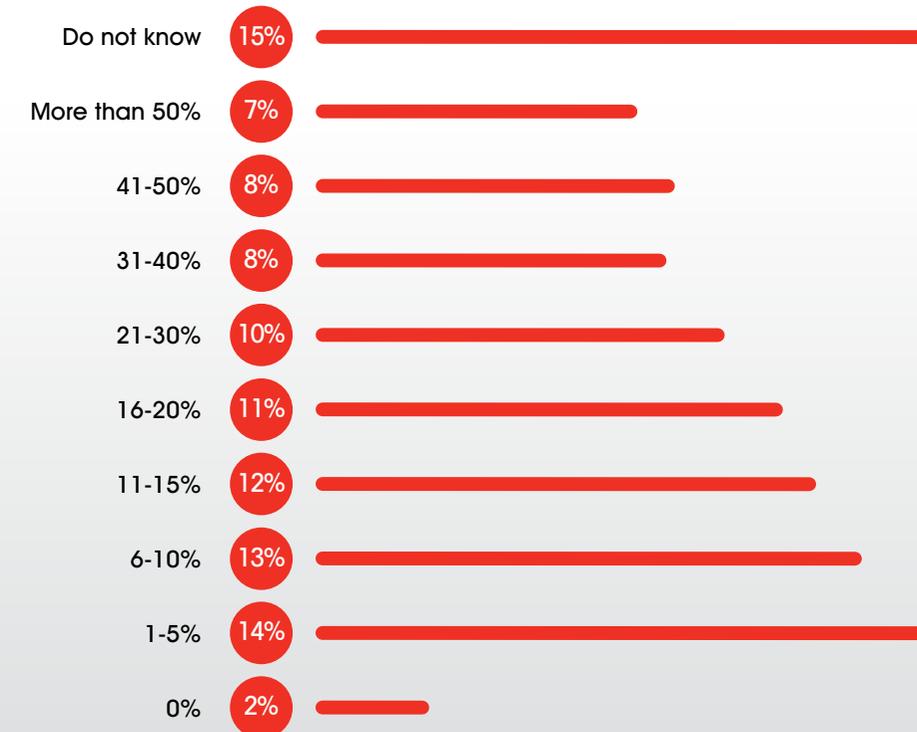
To the best of your knowledge, in the last five years, what proportion of those in your congregation/parish have come to faith for the very first time through the ministry of your congregation/parish?



Is it important to track how many people come to faith in your church? Why or why not?

Does your congregation or parish keep track? Why or why not?

To the best of your knowledge, in the last five years, what proportion of those in your congregation/parish have returned to the Christian faith, presumably after ceasing Christian belief or involvement for an extended period of time, through the ministry of your congregation/parish?



Perceptions on the effectiveness of evangelistic efforts in congregations/parishes may not always correspond with the actual effectiveness of such initiatives, evident in part with the shrinking proportion of Canadians who say they identify as Christian (around two-thirds of the Canadian population) and the growing group of those who say they have “no religion” (about one-quarter of the Canadian population).



One way to test these perceptions among church leaders is to ask congregants themselves. This kind of data is difficult to gather though estimates suggest that 10-15% of those in the pews are “converts.” The rest were either born and raised within the same church, or transferred from another church in the area or due to relocation (e.g., immigration).

60-70% of church leaders say that they engage in evangelistic activities on a weekly basis.

With the exception of engaging others online with evangelistic purposes (around half), roughly 60-70% of respondents say they engage in evangelistic activities on a weekly basis.

How frequently do you participate in the following with those you believe to be lapsed/non-Christians, with an evangelism motive/goal in mind?



Senior church leaders are more likely to practice evangelistic behaviours than youth pastors.

When making the comparison, based on church leadership roles, senior pastors are the most likely to say they participate in the evangelistic activities mentioned, while youth pastors are among the least likely to say they do. Other research on evangelism in Canada reveals that people are more likely to evangelize in “passive” versus “assertive” ways. Looking at the list, verbally sharing the gospel and inviting people to church could be seen as more assertive methods of evangelism versus showing one’s faith through their actions.

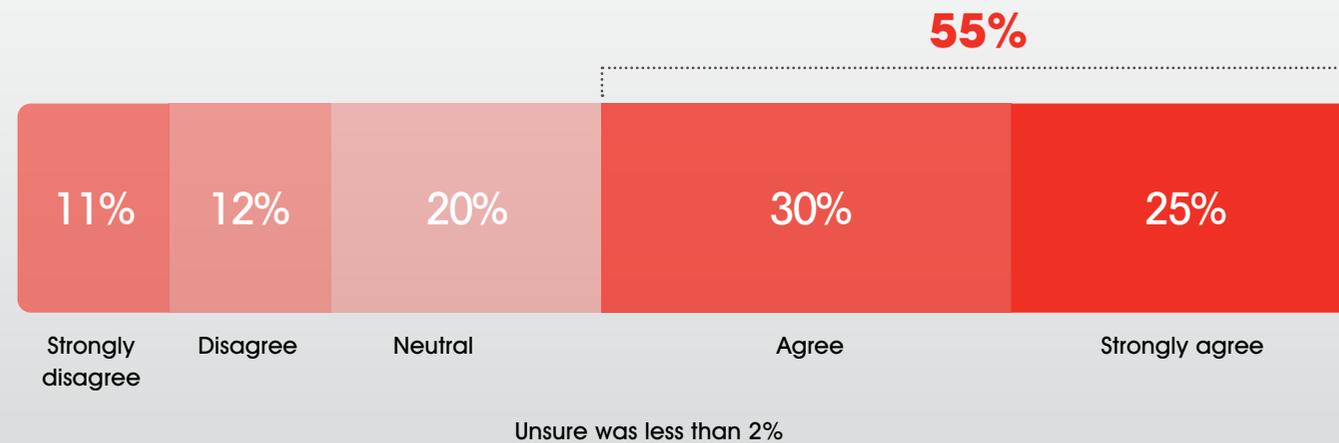
One reason for this might be due to the social risks involved with each method. There is relatively little risk in being nice to a neighbour or coworker. Alternatively, someone who verbally shares the gospel or invites someone to church could find their actions interpreted as exclusive and even intolerant, which may not be well received in a Canadian context that many believe privileges inclusivity, tolerance, and diversity.

Only 55% of church leaders say that prayer is central to evangelism.

It's through prayer that we can discern and respond to where the Holy Spirit is already at work in the lives of the people around us. We see in Scripture that a commitment to prayer is essential to the work of evangelization (e.g., Eph. 6:17-20), but only half of church leaders agree that prayer is central to their church's approach to sharing the gospel.

As previously stated, church growth in Canada is largely driven by Christians moving from one church to another, not from people discovering a relationship with Jesus for the first time. For this to change, we may need a renewed commitment to prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit to lead and empower us as we share the gospel.

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement? "Prayer is central to my church's approach to evangelization."



We believe God has placed leaders in the Church for such a time as this...

to teach, encourage and inspire Canadian congregations and parishes through their daily lives. While leaders might be reticent about holding or advancing evangelistic beliefs and practices that appear to be too exclusive or offensive in a Canadian context, they're passionate to find ways to communicate God's love to the people around them.

COVID-19 was a catalyst for increased prioritization.

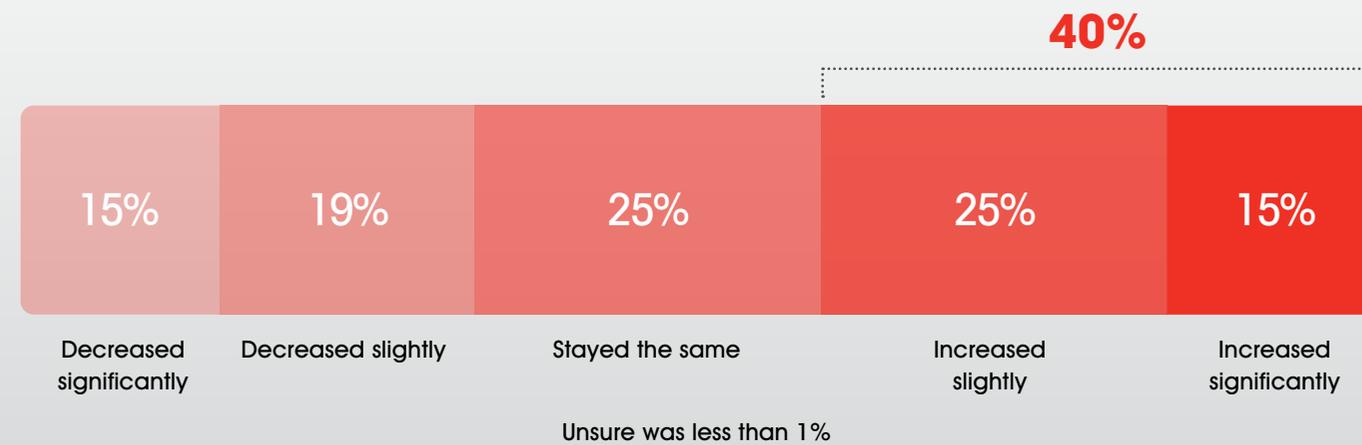
COVID-19 provided a timely catalyst for prioritization and innovation. Roughly 40% of paid and voluntary church leaders claim their church's prioritization of evangelization increased during COVID-19, while about 50% say their church adapted or innovated their approach to evangelism.

One positive of the pandemic for congregations is they have had to rethink what programs or ministries were worth keeping, required adapting, or needed to be let go to best serve their congregation and community. From these statistics, two out of five church leaders signal that they have given more attention to evangelism. Imagine if churches continued to build on this momentum even as we move away from the pandemic.

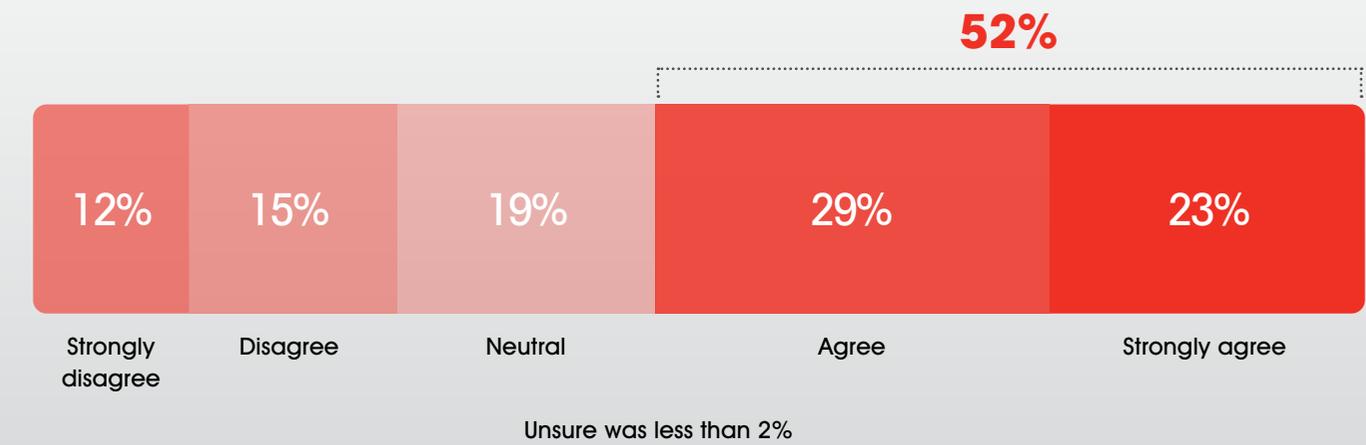
COVID-19 was a catalyst for innovation.

Innovation does not necessarily mean better or more effective, though it may. However, innovation does reveal that groups are aware of and adapting to a changing social environment around them. A key moving forward is to listen and discern well if and how people, circumstances, and environments have remained the same, and where they have truly changed.

How has COVID-19 impacted the prioritization of evangelization in your congregation/parish?



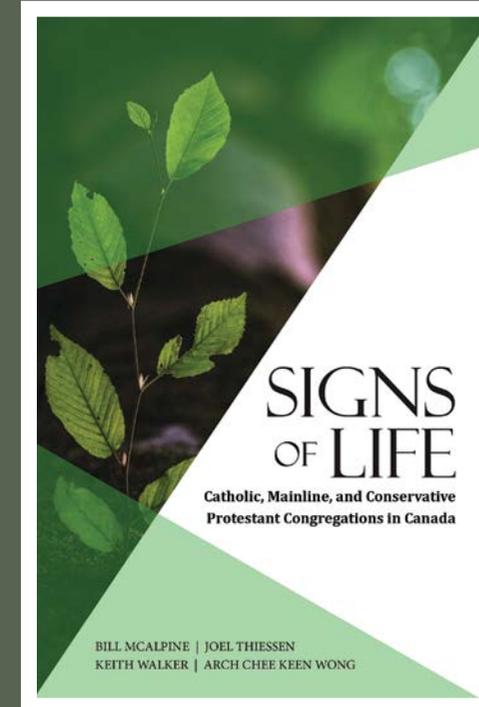
To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement? "My congregation/parish has adapted/innovated how it approaches evangelism during COVID-19."



Making Jesus' last command our first priority

Regardless of the circumstances around us, the challenges or opportunities we face, the imperative of evangelism remains for every single believer. Our challenge is to question ourselves: are we asking, are we inviting, are we praying?





Signs of Life

Dive deeper into evangelism and the Church in Canada. Download a free chapter on the subject of evangelism from the book *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada* at www.alphacanada.org/signsoflife

What does it look like for a congregation to flourish? This is the book's central question, drawing on Canadian-based social scientific research with Catholic, mainline and conservative Protestant church leaders as well as those in the pews. The flourishing congregations construct that anchors this book deals with organizational elements (self-identity, discipleship, engaged laity, hospitable community, and diversity), and outward dynamics (neighbourhood involvement, partnerships, and evangelism) in congregational life. Alongside social scientific observation and analysis, this book deals with a range of challenging theological insights and questions, plus offers numerous practical considerations and possibilities for congregations who wish to flourish. Readers will be left challenged, stimulated, encouraged and mobilized in fresh ways for their local ministry.

The following discussion and self-assessment questions come from the end of Chapter 12 (on evangelism) in the book, *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada*, (authored by Bill McAlpine, Joel Thiessen, Keith Walker, and Arch Chee Keen Wong), along with presentation materials from the research team at the Flourishing Congregations Institute.

Application Questions

- How central is evangelism in your congregation?
- Do you teach and preach on this topic?
- How is your church equipping and empowering its members to evangelize?
- How might you resource your members so that they have adequate training, grow in confidence, and diminish in their fear of rejection?
- In what ways do you encourage members to intentionally build relationships with those outside the Christian community?
- Do you provide opportunities for people to evangelize through a church-wide initiative, like Alpha or something akin to it?
- In what ways do you publicly acknowledge and celebrate new people to the Christian faith?
- Finally, do you monitor the addition of new Christians to your parish, and if so, do you compare your figures from one year to the next? Do you note if those numbers are flat or in decline?

Discussion Questions

1. Consider your favourite restaurant, one that you like so much that you encouraged those around you to eat there. In what ways is this example similar or dissimilar to telling others about your Christian faith?
2. Theologically, what importance do you attribute to evangelism? Explain.
3. What tools or resources do you think would assist you in areas of evangelism? What are the greatest concerns, fears, or limitations that you confront?
4. Think of the last person you knew who was new to Christianity. What was that process and transformation like for them? What impact, if any, did that conversion have on you and those around you?
5. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus stated, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* How do you interpret this text in the scope of your congregation's ministry, and what activities do you envision your church might need to stop, start, or continue to live into this great commission from Jesus?

Self-Assessment Questions

(1-5 SCALE, WITH 1=STRONGLY DISAGREE AND 5=STRONGLY AGREE)

1. Our congregation gives a high priority to evangelism.
2. I feel well equipped to share my Christian faith with others.
3. I invite others who I believe are non-Christian to my congregation.



The Life Shared Series

At Alpha, we believe evangelism simply starts with a life shared.

Through Biblical teaching from leading Christian voices and real stories of invitation, these three sessions explore what it means to live out God's call to share our lives and our faith.

By shifting our posture and practicing hospitality, we can participate in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our friends, family and neighbours.

The Life Shared Series is a valuable tool for any church that is missionally minded and wants to create a culture of invitation as we share the love of God in our communities and nation. The videos and discussion questions are free and downloadable.

For more information about Life Shared Small Group Series, please visit:
www.lifesharedseries.com



Life Shared
Small Group Series



Alpha is a way to inspire and equip churches to create a space where people from any background can encounter Jesus.

The same Alpha content is run all over the world by Christians of all traditions and it provides a common expression of faith. Over 1 million people in Canada have experienced Alpha, and millions more have taken Alpha in over 100 countries and over 100 languages around the globe.

Once a week, groups gather together to connect, watch a video, and discuss 15 key questions around the Christian faith. Alpha is a tool to help churches create a space and a culture where people are excited to bring their friends for a conversation about Jesus. Alpha can be run almost anywhere—from a church basement to a restaurant, in person or online, God is transforming guests, families and church communities.

For more information about Alpha, please visit:
www.alphacanada.org





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Partners who helped make this survey possible...

